

SWCD Training Module

Skills and Traits
of an Effective
Chairman

LEADERSHIP

Chairman's Module

This Module Covers:

- Overview of What the Chairman Does
- Skills and Traits of an Effective Chairman
- Details of the Chairman's Job
 - Getting Started
 - Chairman's Relationship with the District Manager
 - Communication with Other SWCD Supervisors and Staff
 - Passing the Torch
- Where a Chairman Can Find Outside Help

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IDNR Division of Soil Conservation

Indiana Association of Soil and Water
Conservation Districts, Inc.

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The Board Chair Handbook
William M. Dietel and Linda R. Dietel*

Introduction

In Indiana, the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is defined in the Indiana Code (IC 14-32-5-1) with these words: “A district constitutes a governmental subdivision of the state and a public body corporate and politic exercising public powers.”

This training module is designed to assist the Chairman to better understand his or her duties. The Chairman is a public official who leads the Soil and Water Conservation District, in compliance with the law and in accordance with guidelines of state agencies (i.e., the Indiana State Soil Conservation Board, the Indiana State Board of Accounts, and the Indiana State Ethics Commission) responsible for implementing those guidelines. While a book could be written about all that this might entail, this module will confine itself to a few specific items that are of special concern to the duly selected Chairman of the Soil and Water Conservation District.

The position of Chairman of the Soil and Water Conservation District is the only SWCD “officer” specifically identified in the Soil and Water Conservation District Act and is noted in this manner (IC 14-32-4-14):

“The supervisors shall designate a chairman and may change the designation.”

The information in this module should be beneficial not only to the current SWCD Chairman, but may be useful in preparing supervisors for future leadership responsibilities at the local, state, or national level.

What the Chairman Does

The job involves much more than leading monthly meetings

- The Chairman keeps the SWCD focused on its mission, vision, and short and long range goals.
- The Chairman helps the SWCD think strategically about how to achieve its vision, mission and goals.
- The Chairman encourages the supervisors to be a policy-making body, not a management entity.
- The Chairman constantly communicates the message that the supervisors’ responsibility is to be leaders and policymakers.
- The Chairman stays in constant contact with the SWCD’s District Manager (see note below) or lead staff person and other supervisors. Ideally, the SWCD has a professionally trained District Manager to oversee the day to day activities of the SWCD and supervises any other SWCD staff. If the SWCD does not employ a professionally trained District Manager, the Chairman makes it an SWCD priority to acquire the resources needed to hire one. The District Manager is directly accountable to the supervisors.
- The Chairman monitors the activities of each committee.
- The Chairman works with the SWCD’s District Manager to plan SWCD meetings.
- The Chairman conducts evaluations of supervisors and staff effectiveness.
- The Chairman represents the SWCD to the public.
- The Chairman helps recruit and orient new members.
- The Chairman encourages supervisors and staff to attend appropriate educational events to increase the SWCDs overall knowledge on technical, educational, financial, and administrative issues and opportunities.

Note: There are many titles used by SWCDs across the state for their lead staff person. Some SWCDs use the title “District Manager” others use “District Coordinator,” “Program Administrator,” and some use “Executive Director.” For the purposes of this module the term “District Manager” will be used for this staff position.

Skills and Traits of an Effective Chairman

Because of the uniqueness of the position, more skills, time, and commitment is expected of the Chairman than of other supervisors.

- The Chairman is committed to the SWCD's mission.
- The Chairman possesses the ability and desire to inspire a shared vision for the SWCD and for the supervisors' work.
- The Chairman possesses good leadership skills.
- The Chairman is thoughtful, yet decisive.
- The Chairman demonstrates good judgment.
- The Chairman focuses on the mission, but is flexible about progressive changes in how to pursue it.
- The Chairman is willing to empower other supervisors and encourage them to take ownership in the work they do.
- The Chairman is an effective communicator.
- The Chairman possesses good political instincts and the ability to interact with other public officials.
- The Chairman possesses good organizational skills.
- The Chairman should be a motivator and persuader.
- The Chairman supports and encourages the SWCD supervisors and staff.
- The Chairman is a good listener.
- The Chairman should not be bashful about asking for money to meet SWCD program needs.
- The Chairman acts effectively in critical times.
- The Chairman has the confidence to make difficult decisions.
- The Chairman needs to be knowledgeable about and willing to abide by the laws governing SWCD operations (e.g., Open Door Law, District Law, State Board of Accounts Financial Procedures).
- The Chairman is willing to accept responsibility for the supervisors' decisions.

Details of the Chairman's Job

The Chairman helps the supervisors see the importance of the SWCD and its role in the design of community, county, and state improvements.

- **The Chairman has the primary responsibility for coordinating effective supervisor meetings.**
 - Works with District Manager to plan the agenda well ahead of the meetings.
 - Makes sure the agenda is designed to address important issues and make decisions.
 - Works with the District Manager to assure that the supervisors receive the materials and other background information needed to make sound decisions.
 - Leads the meetings.
 - Makes sure the meetings follow the agenda.
 - Provides every supervisor the opportunity to participate in discussions.
 - Assures that the supervisors follow decision-making procedures (i.e., parliamentary procedure).
 - Takes leadership responsibility in assuring the SWCD abides by laws governing SWCD operations (e.g., Open Door Law, District Law, State Board of Accounts Financial Procedures).
 - Appoints committees and committee chairpersons, and empowers the chairpersons to develop the committee.
 - Outlines committees' responsibilities and expectations with the respective chairpersons and attends at least one meeting of each committee per year.
 - Calls executive sessions of the supervisors, when needed, and follows executive session rules.
- **The Chairman makes sure the SWCD staff and supervisors' performance is evaluated.**
 - With the assistance of at least one other supervisor, completes an annual job performance evaluation of the District Manager and any other SWCD staff that do not have a staff supervisor.
 - If an SWCD employee has supervisory authority over other SWCD staff, the Chairman makes sure that person completes job performance evaluations on those staff and reports the results to the board at least annually.
 - Assures that the SWCD conduct self-evaluations.
 - Evaluates supervisors individually.
 - Asks for feedback from supervisors on how he/she is performing as Chairman.

Details of the Chairman's Job - Continued

- **The Chairman facilitates communications with and among supervisors, the District Manager, and other staff as appropriate.**
 - Keeps in touch with supervisors via phone, fax, mail, or e-mail.
 - Promotes the use of new technology such as a Web site to make the SWCD more visible and accessible.
- **The Chairman helps assure that the supervisors receive information, training, and other educational materials to help them perform effectively.**
 - Directs the District Manager to send supervisors news releases, newsletter articles, legislative updates and other information pertinent to the SWCD.
 - Requests that the staff provide written activity reports for SWCD meetings.
 - Reports on his/her SWCD-related activities each month. Asks each supervisor to report on their involvement with any SWCD program-related activities.
 - Occasionally calls for a special meeting of the supervisors, possibly in the form of a retreat, to deal with long-range and strategic planning, priorities and staffing. Takes advantage of opportunities to bring in resource people such as Purdue Extension, IDNR, NRCS, and IASWCD to assist the SWCD.
- **The Chairman helps recruit and orient new supervisors.**
 - Works with the nominating committee to identify board weaknesses.
 - Works with the nominating committee to identify a list of superior candidates to overcome those weaknesses.
 - Strongly encourages the nominating committee to seek supervisor nominees who will bring new skills, experience, and capacity to the SWCD. Makes potential supervisors aware of the SWCD functions and its mission, and expresses his enthusiasm for serving.
 - Keeps potential supervisors informed about the SWCD's program accomplishments, so they are ready to step-up when a need for a nomination arises.
 - Invites interested people to attend SWCD functions and meetings.
- **The Chairman recognizes hard work and achievement of supervisors.**
 - Recognizes hard work and achievement of supervisors, even if the achievements are not directly related to the work of the SWCD. Makes sure it gets publicized (i.e., newsletters and other communication tools). An example would be an election of a supervisor to another board or commission. This helps elevate the stature of the SWCD.
 - The Chairman looks to the future and keeps the SWCD moving forward.
 - Maintains focus on long-term initiatives, and doesn't get caught up in day-to-day issues.
 - Initiates the periodic review and update of the SWCD's Business Long-Range Plan (at least every 3-5 years) in order to keep it fresh, focused and relevant, and develops methods to incorporate public input into the SWCD's needs.
 - Challenges supervisors and staff to set annual goals (Annual Plan) and evaluate progress annually.

Getting Started

- Spend the time needed to understand the SWCD's financial health, effectiveness, and potential.
- Take a critical look at how the supervisors operate.
- Look at the strengths and weaknesses of each supervisor, and the supervisors collectively.
- Take a critical look at each supervisor's contribution and ask, "Is everyone living up to his or her commitment? Are some members being overshadowed by others?"
- Set some expectations of supervisors and let them know you care about their participation and input and that you will be paying attention to what they do.
- If a supervisor doesn't live up to his/her commitment or is overshadowed, address the issue with the person before the issue escalates.
- Take a close look at committee structure (i.e., number of committees, how they operate, their effectiveness). Make sure each committee has a clearly understood charge. As the SWCD grows and the emphasis changes, the purpose or need for some committees may change. Committee structure needs to be revisited periodically to make sure no committee is overloaded or irrelevant.

Chairman's Relationship with the District Manager

The shared leadership between the Chairman and the District Manager is essential to the success of the SWCD.

- Nurture the relationship with the District Manager from the beginning of his/her tenure.
- Sit down with the District Manager as soon as they become the chairman (preferably before) to discuss work styles, how best to communicate, and what he/she views as their strengths and weaknesses.
- Provide consistent guidance and support.
- Keep the lines of communication open to build mutual trust so the District Manager feels comfortable discussing issues and concerns. Try to go no longer than two weeks without communicating in some way with the District Manager.
If possible, plan a regular meeting once a month.
- Spend time together brainstorming issues and opportunities for the organization's future.
- Make it clear as Chairman, that you want to be kept abreast of any problems that may require supervisor involvement. Reassures the District Manager that he/she and the supervisors can handle bad news or challenging situations, but that he/she doesn't want to be caught off guard, if at all possible.
- The chairman needs to remind all SWCD staff that the supervisors are accountable for what the SWCD does and does not do, and therefore they need to be kept informed.
- Take time to understand important issues or problems that the District Manager is dealing with, in order to be as helpful as possible in solving them.
- Keep the District Manager informed about how the supervisors feel about important issues.

Communication with Other Supervisors and Staff

- Handle minor issues outside of meetings. The chairman's goal should always be to maximize time for the board to discuss larger issues, make decisions, and set policy.
- Plan occasional social events to give supervisors and staff the opportunity for casual conversation, and to build relationships and mutual trust.
- Assign mentors to new supervisors to open communications and provide a way for new supervisors to ask questions that they may not otherwise ask in front of the entire group.
- For new supervisors clarify, on paper, the lines of recommended communication (i.e., who is in charge of what, which supervisors have certain expertise, and who best to talk to in a given situation).
- Establish a policy that all supervisors have e-mail or fax access. Encourage supervisors to communicate by e-mail. Consider establishing a member only page on the SWCD's website. If your SWCD does not have a website, consider making that a priority.
- When communicating, do not overload supervisors with too much information at one time.
- Frequently ask how well communications are working, and how it might be improved upon.

Passing the Torch

- Start looking for your replacement soon after you begin serving as chairman. By starting early, you have plenty of time to prepare a current supervisor for the task. Create a plan to cultivate current supervisors who possess potential to serve as future chairman. If none of the current supervisors possess the skills and/or desire to fulfill the task, consider recruiting a new supervisor with the skills and desire to be a leader.
- Every group benefits from new leadership. The SWCD should establish a policy that sets term limits and an orderly transfer of power.
- Encourage future chairman to become involved with different committees and task forces so they can learn about the work they do.
- Encourage future chairman to attend educational events where they can learn about leadership.

Where a Chairman Can Find Outside Help

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**Soil and Water Quality Program Website
Education and SWCD Support**

<http://www.agry.purdue.edu/swq>

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